

ELK HUNTING IN WOLF COUNTRY: THE FACTS

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Wolves and elk numbers: what's the real deal?

Some hunters in the Northern Rockies have reported that it is harder to find elk since wolves have returned to the region, but this is not because there are fewer elk. For example, Montana's elk herd has grown from 55,000 in 1978 to 150,000 today. Rather, as documented by researchers and experienced by sportsmen, wolves cause elk to change their behavior on the landscape. Since the return of wolves to the West, elk tend to linger less in open areas, often move to higher altitudes, and may even leave one valley to seek out more hidden locales in a nearby valley.

While changes in elk behavior may create a more-challenging hunting experience (for wolves as well as people!), elk populations throughout the region remain high. Yes, in a few herds in the N. Rockies, wolves may be one factor contributing to declining elk populations, but wildlife agencies in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho report that overall elk populations are either at, or above, statewide population objectives.

Wolves and hunter harvest

Although widely assumed that wolves decrease hunting success, hunter harvest of elk in the N. Rockies continues to be good in all three states. In Wyoming, hunters had another good year in 2009, leading the region with a 43% success rate. Montana and Idaho hunter success is 22% and 20% respectively.³

All 3 states acknowledge that a primary reason for locally overabundant elk populations is that elk are able to find refuge from hunters on privately owned lands closed to public access. Although this has been little documented, it is possible that wolves may reduce such over-concentrations by hazing the animals from private land into areas where they can be publicly hunted.

Elk Populations by State

Wyoming¹

- 120,000 elk estimated statewide, 50 percent above objective
- The state of Wyoming continues to manage for a reduction in elk population

Montana²

- 150,000 elk estimated statewide, 14 percent over objective
- Montana has the second highest elk population of any state

Idaho

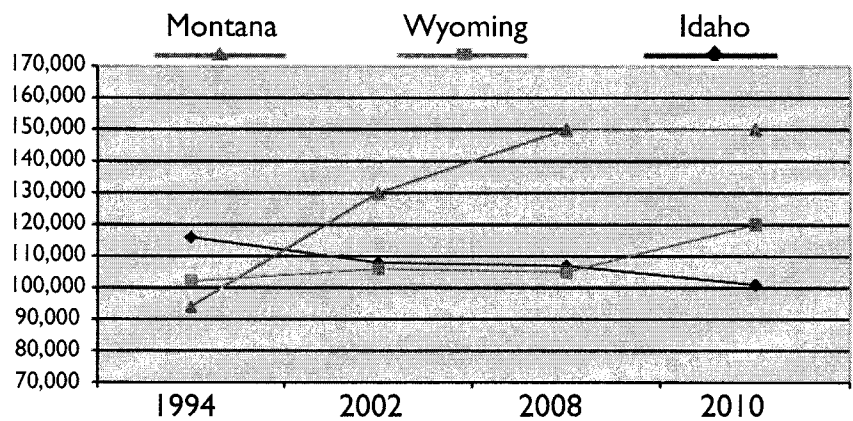
- Estimated population: 101,100, slightly below objective³
- 23 of the state's 29 management zones have elk numbers within targets or above⁴

More interesting wolf-ungulate facts

- Wolves help keep elk herds strong and healthy by preying preferentially upon the most vulnerable, sick or old animals⁵.
- Antelope fawns are a primary prey of coyotes in many areas. A recent study, published in the scientific journal *Ecology*⁶, indicates that wolves have actually increased survival rates of antelope fawns in Wyoming by lowering coyote numbers.
- In years past, state wildlife agencies have frequently issued surplus elk tags and season extensions to reduce elk numbers. This is especially true for the N. Yellowstone elk herd, where wolves have often been blamed for a drop in herd numbers.



Northern Rockies Elk Populations 1994-2010



The future of elk in the Northern Rockies

The biggest threat to elk in the N. Rockies is not the wolf, but rather the loss of habitat due to residential and industrial development. Development not only displaces elk into an ever-shrinking range of quality habitat, but also results in the loss of sportsmen access to traditional hunting grounds. For this reason, preserving as much of our wildlands as possible for elk and all wildlife is crucial, and will require a sustained, cooperative effort by conservationists, sportsmen and wildlife lovers.

Endnotes

- 1 Wyoming Game and Fish
- 2 Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
- 3 Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation 2010 elk forecast
- 4 Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game
- 5 Lukens, Jim. "Eleven years with Wolves - What We've Learned," News release, Idaho Fish & Game Department, April 25, 2006.
- 6 Kim Murray Berger, Eric M. Gese, and Joel Berger. 2008. Indirect effects and traditional trophic cascades: a test involving wolves, coyotes, and pronghorn. *Ecology* 89: 818-828.